

The Way of Wisdom

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I have been pondering “the way of wisdom” for most of my life. Over time, I have learned that wisdom cannot be netted or snared by language. It is so much more than that. Language is only its testimony and not necessarily the best one. Silence is sometimes better. *Be still and know that I am God*, wrote the Psalmist. Language, like the Zen Buddhist description, is “but a finger pointing at the moon” and not the moon. To find oneself in a moonlit meadow or at sunset as the sun is slipping into the edge of the sea, is briefly to experience the awareness that precedes and surpasses the language of our awe.

It seems at first as if wisdom is a thing we search for. We are seekers of wisdom on a quest. This is God’s way—or the universe’s, if you will—of tricking us into waking up. But wisdom, it seems, is not a found thing; not in the seeking but in the *seeing*. As Proust put it, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes” (Proust 1923). The source of wisdom is in the moment before language; in science, the *aha* moment. From this will come words, theories, controversies, papers, conferences, and conversations. Words are the way we share wisdom and grow things from our collective garden. Yet when language just begets language, becomes uprooted from its matrix, wisdom slips away. Rationality is a tool, our most brilliant one. Wisdom is a bearing that uses tools well.

Use. That is the pivotal word. *Homo sapiens sapiens* is distinguished as the tool-maker, *homo faber*. Digging sticks, arrows, slingshots, scalpels, calculators, dishwashers, dynamite, forklifts, atom smashers, telescopes, gene splicers.... This “making” demonstrates our gifted intelligence, but how we *use* what we make demonstrates our wisdom—or, with potentially tragic implications, our lack of it. We now have made so much that we literally do not know where to put it all when it is used up or outdated, which happens at an accelerating rate. The thrill of inventing the new has overcome whatever caution and care our sapience once brought us. Our scientific objectivity has had the unintended consequence of purging itself of this evaluation of use and long-term impact, particularly as it falls into lockstep with the bottom line and is measured by the monetary success essential to its funding. A vicious circle.

Wisdom is not an idea that we grasp, but the way we go about the smallest things—every item we pick up in our daily life, how we use it; and how we use our minds, to what ends. It is through wisdom, and the study of those individuals who have embodied it, that we transform raw experience into culture, good relationships, and strong societies. In short, wisdom is the highest expression of the gift of human life. Ancient Mesoamerican and Chinese cultures each offer an intriguing glimpse into the nature of wisdom as a transformation of raw experience, through a study of their sages.

The Sages of Tamoanchan

When asked about their ethnic origins, Aztec nobles who had survived the Spanish conquest of Mexico gave the following account. It deals with an ancient reinvention of a culture after the long pilgrimage of a people.

They arrived...following the way. They came to the end of it in order to govern here, on this earth that was mentioned by only a single name... "Tamoanchan," which was said to mean "we seek our house." (León-Portilla and Klor de Alva 1992, 41)

Tamoanchan represents the mythical origin of the high culture of the Nahuas (Toltec and Aztec), where the first wise men or sages lived among the ancient people and were called in Nahuatl the *tlatinimeh* or "knowers of things."

And there in Tamoanchan...were the knowers of things, the so-called possessors of codices. But they did not remain very long.... They say that the god came, speaking to them, and when they went, they turned themselves toward the direction of the face of the sun. They carried the black and the red ink, the codices and the paintings. They carried the wisdom. They took all with them. The books of songs and the music of the flutes. (León-Portilla and Klor de Alva 1992, 41)

As Mexican historian León-Portilla says of this passage, "It was thought that existence without history and culture implied the end, not only of their lives, but of the universe itself."

There follows a very poignant passage in the account—a lamentation for their sages:

Will the sun shine? Will it rise? ...
 How will the people be established?
 Because they have gone.
 Because they have taken away the black and the red ink
 How will the people exist?
 How will the city remain on earth?
 How will it have stability?

What is going to govern us?
 What is going to guide us?
 What is going to show us the way?
 What will be our standard?
 What will be our measure?
 What will be our quality?
 Where is it going to end?

How will it come to be, the torch and the light? (León-Portilla 1986, 124)

Fortunately, the people discovered among them four old wise men who had remained behind, and after long deliberation, “they invented the account of the destinies, the annals, and the account of the years, the book of dreams. They ordered how it was to be kept.” We may be looking at an extraordinary event in history, compressed into myth, in which a culture was lost and then reconstituted through the last remnants of its wisdom.

The Sages of Ancient China

On the other side of the world in China, the legendary founder of Chinese culture, Fu Hsi, is also recognized as its first sage—one of the ancient holy sages of the *I Ching*. Here is a description of those sages from the Eighth Wing of that work:

They put themselves in accord with tao [the mysterious “way” of the universe] and its power, *te*, [also translated as virtue], and in conformity with this laid down the order of what is right. By thinking through the order of the outer world to the end, and by exploring the law of their nature to the deepest core, they arrived at an understanding of [destiny]¹. (Wilhelm 1977, 262)

My favorite Chinese sage is the first of the legendary sage-kings, Yao. We meet him in the ancient Book of History, from around the 6th century BCE.

Examining into antiquity, we find that the emperor Yao [2357-2256 BCE?]. . . was reverential, intelligent, accomplished, and thoughtful, naturally and without effort. . . . The display of these qualities reached to the four extremities of the empire and extended from earth to heaven. He was able to make the able and virtuous distinguished, and thence proceeded to the love of the nine classes of his kindred, who all became harmonious. He also regulated and polished the people of his domain, who all became brightly intelligent. Finally, he united and harmonized the myriad states of the empire, and lo! the black-haired people were transformed. The result was universal concord. (Legge 1998, 15)

1 Dr. Yi Wu, in his classes on the *I Ching*, corrected Wilhelm’s translation of *ming* here from “fate” to “destiny,” which shifts the meaning from random chance to a “destiny to be fulfilled.” I have followed his counsel.

I know of no figures from antiquity, real or legendary, who come down to us with such a detailed and pristine character. The account tells us that Yao commanded his brothers “in reverent accordance with their observation of the wide heavens, to calculate and delineate the movements and appearances of the sun, the moon, the stars, and the zodiacal spaces, and so to deliver respectfully the seasons to the people” (Legge 1998, 15). He commands his second brother “respectfully to receive as a guest the rising sun” and gives similar commands to three other brothers to make celestial observations and observe the changes in nature. From this information, he creates the calendar that will put his people “in accord with tao and its power.” To each brother he concludes with the words, “Go, and be reverent” (Legge 1998, 15). In looking at Yao through the lens of an ancient history, we gain insight into the builders of places like Stonehenge and the unknown sages who, through their science and wisdom, created a lasting future for their people, like the sages of Tamoanchan.

Over a thousand years later, at the age of seventeen, the great Neo-Confucian philosopher Cheng I wrote a letter to the emperor: “What your subject has studied is the tao of the world’s Great [Center]”²; he writes:

Sages take it as their nature and are sages.... As tao it is utterly vast, but its practice is utterly easy. Through the Three Dynasties (of the early sage-kings) there was no one who did not follow it. Since Ch’in [221-206 BC] it has declined without revival.... For two thousand years the kingly tao has not been practiced. People living in later times all dolefully say that the times are different and that things have changed, so that it cannot be practiced again. This is the depth of their ignorance.” (Smith, Bol, Adler, and Wyatt 1990, 136)

Later in life, one of Cheng I’s students asked him this question: “In the school of the Sage (Confucius), there were three thousand followers. Only Yen Tzu was said to love learning. It is not that the three thousand scholars did not practice until they comprehended the Book of Documents, the Book of Poetry and the six arts. What then did Yen Tzu alone love to learn?”

Cheng I said, “Learning the tao of becoming a sage.”
 “Can one become a sage though learning?”
 He said. “Yes.”
 “What is the tao of learning?”
 “The tao of all learning is to ‘rectify one’s mind’ and ‘nourish one’s nature.’ That is all. When you are centered, correct, and authentic, you are a sage.”
 (Smith, Bol, Adler, and Wyatt 1990, 138)

2 This Confucian classic, *Chung Yung*, is usually translated as “The Doctrine of the Mean,” but *chung* literally means “middle” or “center,” so I have made this substitution for clarity.

The Chinese also recognized in their sages an exceptional capacity to see, to hear, and to observe closely in order to “catch the seeds of things,” their subtle beginnings.

The Master said: “Does not he who knows the springs of things possess spirit-like wisdom?... Those springs are the slight beginnings of movement, and the earliest indications of good fortune (or ill). The superior man sees them and acts accordingly without waiting for (the delay of) a single day.... The superior man knows the minute and the manifested;... he is a model to ten thousand.” (Legge 1969, 321)

Science, Wisdom, and the Future

Of all the things that face extinction, the one I am most concerned about is exactly that sensibility to the world from which the sages drew both their wise understanding and their wise action. This is the part of us that comes to life and light in the moment of seeing, touching, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling the world. It is the consummate sensibility that took 13 billion years of cosmic and planetary history to create and it is also the ground of our awareness as the source of all that we know. Watching nature programs on TV can hide the natural world from us. A billion fingers pointing can blot out the moon. Libraries and hard disks and a cyberspace of words can stifle the original silence that gives birth to language. We are the highest, most intricate and articulate branches on the tree, but if we lose essential touch with the invisible roots that are both our origin and sustenance, we will be dead branches on the tree of life—the most perishable of all.

The future—it is unimaginable. The sky is no longer the limit. It is all about radical change, as we are seeing all around us, from the radically new ideas that have sparked our inventions and technologies to our election of the first African-American president. But we now seek radical change at an entirely different level: at the root of our myriad new discoveries, we must recover the stillness—the care and vigilance—of an abiding wisdom that will govern their use and protect our future. It won't be easy for us. It certainly doesn't come as easily as upping the gigabytes on our computer or the size of our TV or the versatility of our cell phones. *Homo faber* has become *homo consumer*. We don't make things—we buy them.

A thousand green words and green projects will not save the planet on their own. In fact the planet does not need to be saved any more than the universe does. It needs to be *seen*, in a bearing of reverence and gratitude and the natural love that flows from that seeing—not as subject to object but as immediate mutual presence. This is what allowed the ancient sages to grasp the subtle beginnings of things and to put themselves in accord with nature, the cosmos, one another, and themselves. For us, this will be the seeing of the naturalist, the farmer, the teacher, the scientist, the artist, the business person, the economist....

All of those capacities that we now share as a species, all of our wondrous gifts, will atrophy if we relinquish our tasks entirely to our fabrications.

We are challenged now to put ourselves back together again as true *Homo sapiens sapiens*—the wisest of hominids. The end result—with the complete circulation of life from invisible root to intricate articulation—is not just survival. It is falling in love again with everything and with all of us—mind, heart, spirit, all the senses. Just imagine what is possible if we gather ALL of our venerable planetary gifts, including our millennia-old spiritual teachings, our knowledge, our art, our music, our cities—which flourish as the centers of our planetary civilizations—and the mysterious loveliness of the planet itself. We have the privilege of being alive when we do not have to pour our energies into the raw and all-consuming tasks of survival. Can we expand ourselves to take it all in and become more richly and generously human? As so many things seem to be disintegrating around us, the opportunity is back for reconsideration, literally a *re-mem-bering* that binds the past with the future, the root of our nature with the highest branches of our science. Now we may ask those questions once again:

What will be our measure? What will be our quality? What is going to guide us? What will guide the *use* we make of our great powers? How will it come to be, the torch and the light?

We are ready once again for the return of the sage, but now it must come from within each of us.

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